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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000213

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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: AMBASSADOR DELIVERS STRONG MESSAGE ON NICARAGUA,
CUBA

REF: SCHIFFER-SANDROLINI EMAILS; (B) REGAN-SANDROLINI EMAIL; (C) BRENNAN-SANDROLINI EMAIL

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CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher Sandrolini, Deputy Chief of Mission,
EXEC, State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary. Ambassador delivered a strong message to the Holy See concerning the unhelpful activities of Nicaraguan Cardinal Obando, and also pressed on Cuba. Vatican deputy foreign minister listened carefully and promised to see what could be done regarding Obando, but remained noncommittal on Cuba. End summary.

Nicaragua

12. (SBU) Ambassador Rooney called on Monsignor Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Undersecretary for Relations with States (equivalent to deputy foreign minister), on October 10 to discuss issues in Nicaragua and Cuba. Also present were DCM and Monsignor Paolo Gualtieri.

13. (C) Ambassador told Parolin that he knew Nicaragua quite well, along with a number of prominent people there, and felt developments in that country personally. It is painful, he said, to see the politicized actions of Cardinal Obando y Bravo. Obando -- once so heroic but now openly supporting the Sandinistas -- has become the subject of many ugly and widespread rumors which are harming the image of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua. The ambassador strongly urged Parolin to find a way to persuade Obando to stop this activity.

14. (C) Parolin responded that the papal nuncio had informed him earlier in the summer of Obando's political activities, but he registered the concern of the United States as something of additional gravity. He warned that cardinals, particularly retired ones, have considerable autonomy, and it would not be easy for the Holy See to bring him around. He also recalled Obando's celebrated past. However, Parolin readily acknowledged that it is the standard position of the Church to remain apart from politics, and he promised to look into what could be done.

15. (C) Parolin said it was his impression that the Sandinistas were favored to win the elections next month, and wondered to what extent the Sandinistas had really changed (for example, in seeming more respectful of religion). Ambassador said the election would certainly be close, and that leopards don't change their spots. Parolin laughed but said the Holy See felt the change was at least partly genuine.

Cuba

16. (C) Ambassador told Parolin the USG believes the Cuban people only should decide on their form of government, and that we of course hoped to see freedom and democracy emerge there. The Catholic Church has an important role to play in this time of transition. DCM provided Parolin with information about the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, clarifying that it was not in any way a plan or blueprint to be imposed, but rather an elaboration of U.S. policy for assistance to a democratic government. The ambassador observed that a mishandled transition could have potentially disastrous consequences, such as enormous flows of refugees and internal chaos.

17. (C) Parolin agreed that all countries, certainly including Cuba, had the right to freedom and to an independent choice of government. However, he cautioned on the need for patience, noting that the Holy See does not use the word "transition" when speaking of Cuba; change in Cuba will not be easy, and a gradual approach will help prevent violence. The Church finds itself in a delicate position, and prefers to remain neutral. Parolin recalled something Raul Castro had told the papal nuncio during Fidel's incapacitation: that "revolution is to change what most

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needs to be changed". The Holy See had taken this as a promising hint that Raul might be ready to accelerate reforms. Parolin also noted that the Holy See remains firmly opposed to embargos, including the US embargo on Cuba.

Comment

18. (C) Parolin took the message on Nicaragua seriously, despite his caveats. Embassy Managua may wish to check in with the papal nuncio there in the next few days to verify that he has received guidance concerning Cardinal Obando. On Cuba, the Holy See remains in agreement with the USG on desirable outcomes, but also remains distinctly reluctant to say anything public about a transition.
ROONEY